

The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe

Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

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When I mention the word "king," what image comes to mind?

As many of you know, I recently returned from pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela on the Camino Frances, a pilgrimage route which is over 1,000 years old. I walked 500 miles across Spain, with Fr. Tony Neusch from Amarillo, Texas, to venerate the apostle, St. James the Greater, at his tomb in the Santiago Cathedral. I have a great devotion to St. James, my patron saint, after whom I am named since I was born on his feast day.

In churches throughout Spain are the tombs of many of the kings (and queens) of the medieval kingdoms of Navarra, Aragon, Leon and Castille who were strong supporters of the Catholic Church and instrumental in the building of some of the most beautiful cathedrals in Spain. Throughout my pilgrimage, I was privileged to tour and attend Mass in a few of these cathedrals in: Pamplona, Burgos, Leon and Santiago de Compostela. Most of the royal tombs in these cathedrals are quite ornate bordering on ostentatious, reflecting how the royalty viewed themselves. These images of royalty mirror the time and culture in which they were created.

In the first century A.D., the Messiah, the promised deliverer of the Jewish nation as prophesied in the Old Testament, was expected to be a great warrior king like those medieval Spanish kings or King David in the first reading. This Messiah was to lead the Jewish people and free them from the tyranny of the Roman Empire.

When Jesus came along, however, he preached a gospel of humility, love, forgiveness and peace, which was the polar opposite of what was generally expected of the coming Messiah. Jesus' actions and message were not very king-like, as defined in his time. In fact, the Gospel according to Luke that we've heard throughout this liturgical year which concludes today, doesn't refer to Jesus as a king until the time of his passion. Then Luke tells us that when Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the crowd cried out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" although days later that very same crowd shouted "Crucify him!" Jesus himself avoided claiming the title of king when Pontius Pilate asked him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" And as we heard in today's Gospel reading, at his crucifixion, his executioners and the crowd mocked him with the title of "king."

Luke's way of using the term suggests that if we want to think of Jesus Christ as a king, we must allow Jesus' own actions to define the meaning of his kingship.

Jesus exercises his kingship by pardoning his persecutors and as we heard in today's gospel, offering a place in his kingdom to a condemned criminal. He also demonstrates his intimate relationship with God through a Son's obedience by his saying, "Not my will, but yours be done." Jesus displayed his kingship by accepting death with an unshakable faith in God the Father's power to give life.

In other words, Jesus lived up to the title placed on his cross by redefining kingship, revealing what it looks like in the divine realm rather than in the world of earthly politics and power.

The Solemnity of Christ, King of the Universe, which we celebrate on this last Sunday of the liturgical year, is less than a century old. Pope Pius XI established this feast in 1925 to combat the rise of secularism and nationalism, which sounds eerily familiar today, almost 100 years later, when materialism and relativism seem to rule as king.

In conclusion, I again ask, what image comes to mind when we hear the word "king?" Who will we follow? Earthly kings who have worldly power that is only temporary, or Christ, King of the Universe, who was born, suffered, died and rose again so that we might have eternal life?